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English IV

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Sugar and Spicy

 The metal on the batting cage’s chain link fence was rusting after years of rain and snow wearing down the surface. One of the reasons we liked going into this old, run-down cage was this fake barf-green turf that carpeted the concrete floor. It wasn’t exactly soft, but it was better than sitting in the dirt or on the concrete. Plus, it was cool--if a little damp--if it had rained the night before. In the corner of the cage was a spot of shade provided by this massive oak tree that stood in the lot outside the baseball fields, and in that shadow was a cherry red steel trunk full of old, leathery catcher’s gear. The paint was chipping, though we had something to do with that. There were always white cans from Home Depot lying around the cage, and it wasn’t too hard to gather them around the trunk in the shade.

All of us had older brothers on the same baseball team, and so we all agreed to go to the games so we could all play together. The games would be played at Antler Field, a hodge-podge field for youth baseball games. Kate, Davis, Mason, Reagan, and I would go back to this very batting cage that was right next to left outfield, way past the bleachers. It gave us privacy from parents so we could talk about risque topics such as who-liked-who and who-said-what.

 I reached to grab the solid-metal latch to enter the cage, and I recoiled in pain when I realized the metal was still hot.

I sucked air in sharply. “Ah, what the-- watch it, it’s hot!”

Davis chuckled while I cradled my thumb. “Idiot. Lemme go find a stick or something.” Davis fit a small stick between the bars and lifted the latch. He pushed the stick against the door, and it gingerly creaked open.

 Reagan and I immediately raced for the trunk. It was well-known that the trunk was the best seat, and it was common practice to fight tooth-and-nail for it. We both got there before anybody else had the chance. Davis, Kate, and Macie grabbed a couple loose pails to sit on and gathered around the typical spot.

 “Alright guys, who goes first?” Reagan asked, but Kate was already reaching for something from her white nylon drawstring bag.

 “Wait a sec, I got something that might be fun,” Kate said. She drew from her bag a small can with a relatively nondescript label. “You know how my dad grows those peppers in our backyard? He pickled ‘em, and now we have a couple cans. I brought one just in case we would play.”

 Oh, Kate. Always the prepared one, for better or for worse. She brought these because, seeing as we were little kids in a small batting cage, our dares sucked. They weren’t very challenging, and they weren’t very fun. The game kinda favored taking dares over truths, and we all know that getting players to tell truths is what it’s about.

In any case, Davis got excited. I, on the other hand, was less so. I didn’t like spicy food. At all. I didn’t like the way that it forces your sinuses open while simultaneously filling them with snot and hot air, I didn’t like the way it bites your taste buds on that first chomp, and I especially didn’t like how it took *forever* for that burning sensation to leave your mouth.

 Macie started us off. “Reagan: truth or dare?”

 Reagan leaned back and looked up. “Uh, I guess I’ll go with truth.”

 “Who do you think is annoying in our grade?”

 Again, we were young kids.

 Reagan did this cute thing where she creased the side of her mouth in concentration. I felt my cheeks heat up a bit, but it didn’t seem to appear on my face through my various sunburns.

 This was during a middle school summer, a hellish time of prepubescent awkwardness. Kids my age were mentally mature enough to have crushes on people, but they weren’t emotionally mature enough to be able to articulate it in a way that wasn’t soul-wrenchingly awkward.

 Unfortunately, my little heart had fallen for the girl-next-door archetype, Reagan Anderson. Our families had been friends since my family moved to Elkhorn, and I saw Reagan nearly every day. As much as I hated how awkward it made talking to my childhood best friend, it only made sense that I crushed on her. She had all the things a kid in elementary was looking for: she was fast (like, we are talking seven-minute-mile fast), she could play sports, and she read, too. Reading was more of a personal requirement, though.

 “I guess Corey is pretty annoying, although Sam or Ethan Christie is too.”

 Solid answers. I knew that Ethan Christie and Corey had crushes on Reagan too, so I was enthused she found them as annoying as I did.

 We went around for a good hour, asking questions that shared similar frameworks and posed similar questions. We weren’t incredibly creative in our truths. Most interestingly, nobody had taken a dare yet. We were all scared of the peppers.

 It came to Davis, who decided to ask me whether I wanted a truth or a dare.

 Now, I was a stupid kid, but I sure wasn’t dumb. I knew that Davis, who loved asking people who they liked, would ask me who I liked if given the chance. I could lie, but then Reagan might think that I don’t like her and I don’t want her to think that in the case that she likes me too. If I asked for a truth and told it, I might scare Reagan away from me because it might weird her out. We had been friends for a super long time, and that would ruin it.

 “Dare.”

 A tactical move. I keep my secrets and I also get to show Reagan that I’m not scared of spicy food. If I play my cards right, I might even impress her.

 Everybody oohed as they realized what I just said.

 “Eat onna’ Kate’s peppers,” Davis predictably asked.

 I reached for the can, and Kate handed it to me. I popped the top off, and a flood of scents rushed towards me.

 I coughed as the pungent odors of vinegar and pepper escaped the can. The liquids inside sloshed as I tilted the can away from me and gingerly picked a small pepper out.

 All eyes were on me. I pushed my head back, took a deep breath, and dropped the pepper in.

 “No way! He *actually* just did that!” Davis cheered.

 Most notably, Reagan seemed impressed. Nice.

 Now, all I had to do was chew and swallow while keeping my cool. As it turned out, that was easier said than done. I bit into a seed and holy hell was unleashed unto my tongue. My face contorted in pain as I realized just how spicy these peppers were.

 Concern spread across Macie’s face. “Jack, are you choking?”

 I shot a strained look towards Macie. She was so unbelievably nice, but man, she did not know how to read faces. “No, Macie. I’m good. Thanks.”

 She smiled, completely--and thankfully--oblivious to the caustic nature of my comment.

 After wrestling for a little while longer with the awful flavors that pervaded my mouth, I finally proved triumphant. My hands shot up, and my jaw unhinged to show the absence of the pepper. Everybody seemed relatively impressed, but only one person’s impression mattered to me. And boy, was I happy to see that she was impressed too.

 “My turn,” I called. I took a moment to consider who I wanted to ask, but it was a very short moment. I already knew. “Reagan, truth or dare?”

 She did that cute mouth-crease again. Oh, it doesn’t matter what I get in return for eating that pepper. I’d eat any and every pepper if it meant she would do this cute thing every time I did.

 “Uh, truth, I guess,” she said.

 I squinted and put my hand underneath my chin. I wanted to ask a question that would either glean what she thought of me romantically or, in the very least, plant the seeds of such considerations. I couldn’t directly address it about me, though. That’s too obvious.

 “Reagan, if you were stuck on a desert island with one boy, who would you pick?”

 In some cruel twist of fate, the parents in the bleachers began to clap. It appeared that the baseball game had ended, and the teams were lining up for the end-game ritual of high-fiving each person on the other team.

 “Thank God!” Davis cheered. “I was getting bored with the game.”

 Davis, Kate, and Macie stood up and raced for the cage door. Kate grabbed the latch first, which turned out to be a mistake. She recoiled upon realizing that the latch was still very much hot. Macie came behind her with a stick, and she pulled the same maneuver Davis performed earlier.

 Reagan and I hung back. She was still thinking, and I cared what she answered.

 “Well, I’d pick you, of course. You are my best friend. Besides, what other boy would I bring? Davis?” She laughed, and she began to walk out of the cage.

 I exhaled deeply, and it became tough to fight the urge to smile. Oh, sweet relief. At least she didn’t like other boys. That’s good enough for me.